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HINTS

ON

THE CATHOLIC QUESTION.



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THE CATHOLIC POSITION

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HINTS, &c.

Among the various arguments, which have been urged against the claims of the Catholics, none perhaps is less defensible, than that the existence of statutes of a persecuting nature against them, is a reason for their being continued. Because a thing has been, it must always be. But, if this argument is to prevail, it is nugatory to have any legislature at all. The truth is, that we live in extraordinary and perilous times, to which the principles and maxims of our forefathers cannot often, perhaps but seldom, have properly any application.

The destruction of the temporal, and the diminution of the spiritual power of the Pope,

the overthrow of most of the governments upon the Continent, and the formation of the gigantic empire of France, have made a sudden and astonishing alteration in the situation of all those governments, which have had the good fortune to stand the shock. The insular position of this country, the wealth and spirit of its people, and, more than all, the renovation of its political constitution at the Revolution, have hitherto preserved us from the heavy calamities, which have visited a large portion of the habitable globe. But, although recent events may have diminished our danger for the present, it is impossible to contemplate the future without some mixture of alarm. The lion is struggling in the toils, but he is not yet subdued, and his power to do mischief to a great extent, at least, may possibly be shortly restored. The great object of Buonaparte is to destroy the wealth, liberty, and happiness of this country, which has alone prevented the completion of his ambitious projects. He lives but to injure us, and we know that he pos-

sesses great talents, great energy; and, notwithstanding all that has happened, may continue to possess great power. Under such circumstances, we are necessarily forced to resort to new expedients to provide a sufficient revenue, for keeping up vast establishments by land and sea, such as the wisest statemen, of even the last age, could not have formed any conception of. The system of taxation, to which the subjects of Britain have cheerfully submitted, has been carried on to an extent unknown to any other country. Supposing we could boast, which we cannot, of a population in Great Britain and Ireland, of 20,000,000 of men, women, and children, and that the taxes raised annually are 90,000,000*l.* every person, rich or poor, young or old, upon an average, pays to the state the enormous sum of 4*l.* 10*s.* *per annum*; and in the price of every article of consumption, in consequence of that taxation, twice as much more, especially if the poor rates, and other parochial taxes are included. But even taxation pressed to this

prodigious extent, is found insufficient; and expedients still more ungracious and more unpopular, than those already so highly grievous and oppressive, have been hinted at. The system has been already pushed to a dangerous extent; and our rulers feel the anxiety of men arrived at the brink of a precipice, afraid to proceed, and reluctant to retreat.

It may be worth enquiring by what means the British nation has so peaceably submitted to the astonishing burdens imposed upon it. The mystery may be explained in a few words. As its burdens have increased, its government has become more democratic. The publication of the debates in the house of parliament, exposes most of the important measures proposed, and many of the more secret intrigues of the court to discussion and censure among persons of every description out of doors. Great inconveniences certainly attend this publicity, among others the communication of intelligence to the enemy; but it has tended, more than any other circumstance, to tranquillize the minds

of the people, and give them a great deal of power in the representative body. No statesman knew the value of popular opinion better than Mr. Pitt, and none ever took advantage of it more successfully. It brought him into power, and when he proposed most of his great measures of finance, he took care to secure it before hand: the property tax is a notable instance, for which he contrived to get the request of the sage merchants of London, before he ventured to bring it into parliament.

Never was there a minister so fertile in expedients, and by those expedients some of his friends are of opinion, he saved his country. I will not dispute that point at present, but call the attention of those who think so, to what he thought and did upon the subject of religious liberty. That he disappointed many of those, whose exertions brought him into power, cannot be denied; and never was so large a body of liberal and enlightened people more surprized, than when his opinion was announced to be hostile to the repeal of the test laws, which excluded Protestant dissenters

from offices, except indeed when he raised, in opposition to their claims, the senseless cry, *of the church is in danger*, and let loose the blood-hounds of persecution. Their outrages may be traced in the neighbourhood of Birmingham at this day; and the memory of this minister will be for ever stained with the charge of sheltering from enquiry, and approving the conduct of magistrates charged with encouraging the perpetrators of them. But Mr. Pitt's system led him to enquire rather what was *expedient*, than what was *right*. And in his history it cannot be regarded as a trifling incident that he lived, we shall not say to change his principles, but to see the circumstances of the times so altered as to compel him to pursue a directly contrary line of conduct upon a nearly similar occasion. The principles of the Catholics have been represented by friend and enemies of their claims so differently, that an impartial bystander might doubt whether they could be honestly attributed to the same body. For the purpose, however, of the present argument, we will assume, which certainly is not the case,

that their principles are as wicked and detestable as their greatest foes could wish them to be understood to be. But how then shall we account for Mr. Pitt's having been an advocate for their claims? He was never suspected of having any predilection for the tenets of their church; he never was suspected of hostility to the established religion, or the monarchial form of our government. Whence then this change? It did not in fact arise, as has been observed before, from any alteration in his sentiments, but in the state of the country. He thought justly, that for the security of the throne and church, and the prevention of general anarchy and ruin, the conciliation of the Catholics was not only expedient, but necessary. He did not act or think in the character merely of a friend to the Established Church, or a bigot to its religious tenets. The measure presented itself to his mind, in a political view, as of vital importance; and to form his judgment, he took into consideration the relative situation of the British empire to foreign states, the fear of

disaffection from the loss of our commerce, and the increase of taxes, the necessity of unanimity at home, and attaching to the government four millions of subjects, from whom the naval and military establishments derive a great portion of their strength. Not forgetting that possibly the withdrawing of these supplies might necessarily, and perhaps suddenly, defeat every military exertion in both services. If this was the cool deliberate judgment of a statesman, who in his day filled so large a space in the public estimation, we may ask what has happened since his death to make a change? If he had been now alive he must have advocated the claims of the Catholics: he was earnest about them; and retired from the confidence of his sovereign, because he pressed them without being listened to. But he has not been singular in this opinion. Mr. Fox, his political opponent, was a zealous advocate for the same claims, upon more enlarged and generous principles; and many of the adherents of Mr. Pitt, and most of the friends of Mr.

Fox, still retain their sentiments. To accomplish the union with Ireland, Mr. Pitt was obliged to enter into negotiations with the Catholics, and, as they assert and believe, he promised that their emancipation should be the consequence. With him, one of the most powerful arguments in favour of the union was, that the church of England and Ireland being united, would give to the Protestants an ascendancy in the latter country, and such an accession of strength, consistency, and power, that the most timid Protestant ecclesiastic could not seriously feel any apprehension from the rendering Catholics capable to partake of political offices and power. He acted, throughout, as the firm and zealous supporter of the established church; his motives cannot be suspected; and those who still respect his memory, must admit that he could not have supported the claims of the Catholics, if he had thought them to be (as some of the clergy, contrary to his expectations, profess to do now) dangerous, both to the civil constitution, and religious establishment of his country.

Lord Castlereagh, one of the present cabinet, under the auspices of Mr. Pitt, was the immediate and effective instrument of the union. His situation enabled him to estimate justly the degree of danger likely to attend these concessions, and he solemnly promised them to the Catholics, and still continues his professions of friendship to their cause. All the Lord Lieutenants who have presided in Ireland, with the exception of Lord Westmoreland, have in succession, uniformly declared the same sentiments; and however hostile to each other in party matters, in this they have all agreed, that imperious necessity, in the present exigency, requires the conciliation of so large a portion of British subjects, and that whatever risks may attend the experiment, it is expedient to try it. The highly respectable names of the Marquis of Buckingham, the Earl of Carlisle, the Marquis Camden, Marquis Cornwallis, the Earl of Hardwicke, the Duke of Bedford, forbid the supposition that their opinions were formed upon any but the purest motives. Every one of them was resident there for years, and pos-

possessed the most ample means of information. But this is not all—in the Duke of Bedford's administration, the grateful intelligence was conveyed to the proscribed Catholics, that the heir-apparent to the crown was inclined to be their protector and friend, with an assurance that, if he should succeed to the throne of his ancestors, he would still continue to be so.

Yet further to quiet the fears of the church, and give comfort to its members, we shall find in the heterogenous mixture of ministers now entrusted with the concerns of this mighty empire, the Lords Castlereagh, Harrowby, Mulgrave, and Melville, and Mr. Vansittart are among those who have voted in favour of Catholic emancipation. But the Lords Eldon, Sidmouth, Liverpool, Bathurst, Westmoreland, and Buckinghamshire, with Mr. Bragge Bathurst, happen to be of a different opinion, though some of them, at least, admit the Catholics of the present day entertain no principle unconnected with the security of a Protestant ascendancy. They

have deserted, or are not friends to the principles of their ancient leader, Mr. Pitt, and profess themselves to be alarmed at visions conjured up in their own imaginations. The rest of the kingdom are now called upon to participate in their folly, and surrender their understandings to their guidance. In this fractional part of a ministry, remarkable for its weakness, we seek in vain for names of authority and weight; we seek in vain for those transcendant faculties and powers of mind which might command the attachment and veneration of the subjects of a great empire committed to their government. But if among those now in power, the Catholics are to meet with opponents, we may congratulate them and our country that in the Lords Grey and Grenville, Lord Lansdown and Holland, and in that venerable patriot Mr. Grattan, the friends of religious liberty may boast of a tower of strength. These indeed are names, which will be remembered as long as great talents and unshaken integrity, accompanied with great liberality of sentiment upon

all subjects connected with religious liberty, shall command respect among mankind. They have been called to power and resigned it, because they were prevented from effecting the restoration of the Catholics to the common rights of British subjects, and steady to their principles have again spurned at the enjoyment of courtly favour, upon a doubtful subject, honourably deciding against their own interest.

In thus enumerating the modern statesmen, who support the Catholic claims, with a view to compare them in number, talents, and consequence with those who resist them, we must not omit the Marquis of Wellesley, and Mr. Canning, at present unconnected with any of the parties before noticed. Without trespassing upon the reader's patience by entering into a discussion of the merits of the question, it will probably appear a little surprizing that, contrary to the opinions and declared sentiments of so many of the ablest statesmen, who have conceived that the wishes of the Catholics ought to be complied with, the established

clergy should have lately taken alarm themselves, and endeavoured to spread the terror far and wide amongst others. It is to be hoped that this alarm has not been excited, or encouraged for the purpose of intimidating the houses of parliament ; but there could not be invented a more effectual expedient to prevent a cool and satisfactory discussion of a most important political question.

The habits of life, which prevail among the clergy, their seclusion from the world, their meritorious dedication of themselves to the service of the altar, and the exclusive application of their thoughts and pursuits to spiritual things, necessarily render them, of all men, the most unfit to form opinions, and give advice upon temporal and political subjects.

There are some, however, who set a brilliant example of liberality and wisdom, and the cause of religious liberty may reckon among its advocates some of the living ornaments of the church, and some of the present models of learning and piety. Such are Dr. Knox, Dr.

Copplestone and Dr. Parr; and such is the amiable Bishop of Norwich, who unites with primitive simplicity of manners, the firmness of an upright mind, and the extensive benevolence of a Christian Philosopher. These distinguished ecclesiastics have modestly, but firmly vindicated the friends of Catholic emancipation, from the imputation of designs to overturn our establishment, or of indifference to the cause of the Protestant religion.

The promoters, however, of violent measures will always be more active and vigilant than those who are friendly to conciliation and union; and until the moderate party can be roused, their opponents must have the advantage in noise, clamour, and mischief. The violent party in the church condescend to practise every species of artifice and fraud. In their sermons, petitions, and discourses the Catholics are foully traduced, and sometimes personally calumniated as holding tenets, disabling them from performing the common duties of morality; tenets, which they have in the most solemn manner, individually and collec-

tively disclaimed again and again. Whenever the cry of the danger of the church is heard, experience has manifested that its clerical promoters proceed without any regard to charity or common honesty. Their object is to deceive and intimidate, but upon the present occasion it is to be hoped, they will be disappointed; and, in spite of their wishes to the contrary, that the legislature will give the Catholic claims a full and dispassionate hearing, and at last decide, not with the little narrow views of a sect, but upon those enlarged principles which have induced the most illustrious statesmen of our age, to acknowledge, that the Catholics may now be admitted to the full enjoyment of their rights with manifest advantage both to the civil government, and the established churches of England, Ireland, and Scotland.

THE END.

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